

SRI GURU GRANTH SAHIB (SGGS)—A BRIEF HISTORY

By: Ansar Raza

Structure of SGGS

Sri Guru Granth Sahib (*SGGS*) is the most respected and sacred book of the Sikhs. It contains 5894 hymns, called Shabads, composed in 18 ragas (musical patterns). Out of these 5894 hymns, 976 are by Guru Nanak; 61 by Guru Angad; 907 by Guru AmarDas; 679 by Guru RamDas; 2216 by Guru Arjan; 118 by Guru Tegh Bahadur; and 937 by the 15bhagats and bards. The 1430 pages of *SGGS* are divided into 33 sections.

The first section consists of three prayers: Japji—the Morning Prayer; Sodra - the Evening Prayer; and Sohela - the Bedtime Prayer. The next section is composed of the *Bani* of Gurus and Bhagats. Almost every verse of *Bani* of each Sikh Guru ends with the pen name of ‘**Nanak**’ as the author, whether it was composed by Guru Nanak himself or by the other Sikh Gurus who succeeded him. This was designed by Guru Arjan, for presenting oneness in the authorship of all the Sikh Gurus and oneness in the whole philosophy of Guru Nanak under the pen name of ‘**Nanak**’. Nevertheless, the identity of the contributing Guru is specified under their succession number to Guru Nanak. Each part is called **Mahla** by Guru Arjan. Thus, the contribution of Guru Nanak is identified as **Mahla 1** as he is the founder of Sikhism; the verse of the Second Guru, Angad, is identified as **Mahla 2** as he is the second in succession to Guru Nanak; the verse of the Third Guru, Amardas, is identified as **Mahla 3**; and so on. This system has been followed consistently throughout the main text of the *SGGS*.

Bhagat Bani section contains the *Bani* of 13 Bhagats (devotees) namely Kabir, Farid, Namdev, Ravidas, Trilochan, Beni, Dhana, Jaidev, Sain, Pipa, Sadhana, Ramanand, and Parmanand; 4 *Sants* namely Bhikhan, Surdas, and Sundar. These Bhagats were involved in the Bhagti Movement in the medieval India. They revolted against the malpractices in various religions of India. The Swayiaes of Bhatts are grouped together under one section in the *SGGS*, followed by Mundavani (Conclusion or Seal).

The last section is Acknowledgments (Sloka). This is the end of the whole text of the *SGGS* in which Guru Arjan has thanked the Almighty for enabling him to complete this big task of compilation of the divine wisdom into a *SGGS*. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth and last Guru, declared *SGGS* to be the eternal and living Guru. The community called ‘Panth’ is considered the body with ‘Granth’ as its soul.

Recitation Types of SGGS

SHABAD KIRTAN

Daily recitation of the hymns of *SGGS*, morning and evening prayer, is called Shabad Kirtan.

AKHAND PATH

An Akhand Path refers to the reading of the *SGGS*, with no breaks and in full from page one through to page 1430 over a pre-determined period of time. The period of time is usually within 48 hours, but there are also variants of the Akhand Path which denote different time spans.

Compilation History

The process of its compilation has been the subject of considerable discussion. The traditional view is that the Banis, (poetic sayings / writings) including the collected compositions of saints and mystic poets were passed down the line, successively from the first to the fifth guru and finally completed by the tenth Guru. The compilation of *SGGS* was accomplished in two stages. Its first compilation is known as the *Adi Granth*, compiled by the fifth Sikh Guru, Guru Arjan Dev in 1604 CE, known as 'Kartarpuri Bir'. The second version, called 'Damdami Bir', was compiled in 1708 by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru out of his memory, when descendants of 'Dhirmall', grandson of Guru Hargobind Singh, the sixth Guru, refused to give him the original copy. Guru Gobind Singh dictated *SGGS*, to Bhai Mani Singh adding the Bani of Guru Tegh Bahadur, his father and the ninth Guru. He also compiled two books called 'Dasam Granth' and 'Sarab-loh Granth'. The later, containing belligerent teachings incited Sikhs to fight against Moguls. It was kept strictly secret by Akali Nihang Sikhs. Near the end of his life, Guru Gobind Singh ended the line of human Gurus by investing the *SGGS* with the status of Eternal Guru and his official successor.

It is narrated that before his death, Guru Nanak passed on his writings and the collected compositions of the saints to one of his disciples and successor Guru Angad, earlier known as 'Lehna', who in turn passed on the collection along with his own compositions to Guru Amar Das the third Guru. The latter added his compositions to the collection. Guru Amar Das had two sons Mohan and Mohri and a daughter Bibi Bhani. Being the elder son Baba Mohan aspired to succeed his father as the fourth guru. However Guru Amar Das thought otherwise and nominated his son-in-law, Bhai Jetha, to be the fourth Guru and called him "Ram Das." Baba Mohan seems to have sensed this in advance and was jealous of Bhai Jetha. It is believed that he laid his hands on the collected compositions including those of his father. They were not made available to Guru Amar Das for handing over to the fourth Guru on transfer of guruship. These collections are called Mohan Pothis.

When Guru Arjun was appointed as the fifth Guru, he only had the compositions of his father, his own and those of the saints which were presented to him. When he decided to compile the *Granth*, he needed the writings of the first three gurus and saints which were with Baba Mohan. He sent Baba Buddha and Bhai Gurdas, one after the other, to request Baba Mohan to hand over the books, but they returned empty handed. It is narrated that Guru Arjun then personally went to Baba Mohan and recited a Shabad praising Mohan who lived in a tall house. Baba Mohan was moved to hear the hymn. He came downstairs with the pothis (manuscripts) and presented them to the Guru. However, Prof. Devinder Singh Chahal, PhD, in his article "*AAD GURU GRANTH SAHIB—Fallacies and Facts*", refutes this story as fabricated. He is of the view that these Pothis were already with Guru Arjun and the shabad attributed to him is in praise of God and not for Baba Mohan.

In continuation of the above story, it is narrated in Sikh history books, like Gurbilas and others, that the completion of *SGGS* was celebrated with much jubilation. Sikhs came in large numbers to see the *SGGS*. Among the visitors was Bhai Banno, who had led a group of Sikhs from Mangat, in western Punjab. Guru Arjun, who knew him as a devoted Sikh, instructed him to take *AGGS* to Lahore and have the Book bound. As Banno left Amritsar with his sacred charge, it occurred to him to have a second copy transcribed. The first copy, he argued, would remain with the Guru, and there must be an additional one for the congregation. His companions wrote with love and devotion and nobody shirked his duty whether it was day or night. By the time they reached Lahore, the second copy was ready. But Banno had added to it some apocryphal texts. On his return he presented both volumes and explained to Guru why he made another copy. But the Guru put his seal only on the volume written by Bhai Gurdas and installed it in the centre of the inner sanctuary of the temple on August 16, 1604.

Reason for Compilation of SGGS by Guru Arjun

The reason why Guru Arjun took initiative to compile *AGGS* was that a rival of Guru Arjun, Meharban son of Prithi Chand [elder brother of Guru Arjun], had started compiling and circulating his own Granth under the pen name of ‘Nanak’. The Sikh community started getting influenced by his compilation and respecting him as Guru. Sant Sewa Singh describes this event in his book “*Guru Granth Sahib Darshan*”:

“During the life span of Guru Arjun Dev Ji, Meharban, the elder son of Pirthi Chand had begun to write his own immature verse under the name of “Nanak”. The ordinary simple folks amongst the congregation were often confused and duped by this. They were at a loss to know how to differentiate real Gurbani from Meharban’s poetry as both pieces of verse had “Nanak” at the end. Meharban added his own poetry to the original verses of the first four Gurus under Nanak’s name and created a Granth.”

Different Versions of SGGS (Birs)

Regarding different ‘birs’ (manuscripts) of *SGGS* Mohinder Singh, Director, National Institute of Punjab Studies, Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi, writes in his article *Conserving Guru Granth Sahib Manuscripts*:

“Since printing or any other mode of making copies of the scripture were not available in those days, making handwritten copies of the bir was considered an act of religious merit. Devotees spent months together in copying the birs neatly for the benefit of the congregations. However, a survey of some of the rare Guru Granth Sahib birs pertaining to seventeenth and eighteenth century shows that in spite of Guru’s disapproval of the bir copied by Bhai Bano, some of the devotees also made its copies along with the Kartarpuri Bir.

Since the original Kartarpuri Bir was not given to Guru Tegh Bahadur by the Guru’s rivals, Dheermal and his supporters, the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh had to prepare another version of the Guru Granth Sahib, popularly known as the Damdami Bir, which also included a few hymns

of his father Guru Tegh Bahadur. It is this version of the Granth that provides the authentic text of the printed Guru Granth Sahib.

The first serious attempt at locating and cataloguing rare Guru Granth Sahib manuscripts was made by Sardar G.B. Singh, a high ranking official of the Indian Post and Telegraph Department. As an outcome of it, he published a book called, Sri Guru Granth Sahib Dian Prachin Biran, popularly known as Prachin Biran (rare manuscripts). In his preface to the book, G.B. Singh writes that he became interested in the study of rare Guru Granth Sahib manuscripts when the Sikh Sangat of Dhaka presented him with some rare Hukamnamas of Guru TeghBahadur during his visit to that place in 1915 A.D.

During his long tenure in the postal service, he tried to locate and study some more rare Guru Granth Sahib Birs while travelling to different parts of India. Since facilities like photocopying, microfilming or digitization were not available then, G.B. Singh took exhaustive notes himself. Whenever he found any writings in these manuscripts in the hand of the Gurus, he tried to make their copies faithfully by using the tracing paper and has reproduced these rare writings in his book referred to above. In the second part of his book, G.B. Singh mentions the rare manuscripts that he was able to go through during his research. These include rare manuscripts such as the Kartarpuri Bir, the Damdami Bir, Bhai Bano Bir, Bura Sandhu Bir, Pindi Lala Bir (destroyed during the army action in the Golden Temple in 1984), Dehradun Bir and other rare manuscripts at Agra, Mirzapur, Lucknow, Ayodhya, Allahabad, Burhanpur and Patna.

Even though the fifth Guru did not approve of Bhai Bano's action of copying the Adi Granth, it is interesting to note that the devotees kept on making its copies since the original Bir, now known as Kartarpuri Bir, had gone into the hands of the descendents of Dheermal who did not allow its access to anyone. Under the circumstances, the devout Sikhs were left with no option but to make copies from the Bano Bir which was easily available. Therefore, we find many manuscripts of the Bano recession. According to popular belief, the original Bhai Bano Bir was kept with a family of Bhai Bano in village Mangat, District Gujarat (now in Pakistan). After the partition of the country, this Bir was temporarily kept in the house of one Bhai Mastan Singh in village Barot, District Meerut (U.P.). It was here that this Bir was examined by Bhai Randhir Singh, a Gurdwara Inspector of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandak Committee. Later on, this Bir was installed in a Gurdwara built in the memory of Bhai Bano in Jawaharpur, Kanpur. Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi, has six manuscripts of Bhai Bano Bir pertaining to different periods.

RAAG MAALA

Prof. Devinder Singh Chahal, PhD Writes about this section of SGGS:

*"After the Sloka (acknowledgments) there is a small script called **Raag Maala** (Musical modes). There is a lot of controversy about the authenticity of Raag Maala being a part of AGGS. As it is written after Mundanvani and the Sloka, which suggests the end of AGGS, therefore, it cannot be considered a part of AGGS under any circumstances. But according to the "Sikh Rehit Maryada"*

published by the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), Amritsar the "Bhog of Akhand Path" (uninterrupted recitation of the whole AGGS) can be performed after recitation of the AGGS up to Mundavani including Sloka or recitation of Raag Maala could also be included. The SGPC left it to the choice of the Granthis (who recite the Akhand Path) or the individuals, to recite Raag Maala or not, till further decision is taken by the SGPC. About 60 years have elapsed since the above decision was taken; the controversy has not been resolved yet. Recently Gyani Gurdit Singh has again raised this issue in his book, Mundawani, which has been recently banned by Bhai Iqbal Singh, Jathedar of Takht Patna Sahib. His critical study indicates that it is not the part of the AGGS and Mundawani is seal of the AGGS."

Languages of SGGS

The main language of SGGS is the Punjabi dialect prevalent about 500 years ago in northern India. However there are also some hymns in Persian, medieval Prakrit, Hindi, Marathi, Sanskrit as well as Arabic. All of these hymns are written in the standard Punjabi script known as Gurumukhi. However, the grammar used within the SGGS is unique to the scripture and is not found in standard written Punjabi. Prof. Devinder Singh Chahal, PhD Writes:

"The language spoken today in Punjab (India) is quite different from that spoken during the period between the 12th and 17th century when the Bani was composed by Bhagats and Sikh Gurus. Although the Bani was composed and written in the language spoken by the then people, with the time it has become very difficult to understand and interpret it now. Therefore, knowledge of old languages and their grammars is essential to understand the Gurbani in its entirety and originality."

Reverence of SGGS by Sikhs

Guru Arjun directed that during daytime the Holy Book should remain in the Harimandir and by night, after, Sohila was read, it should be taken to the room he had built for himself. As evening advanced, Bhai Buddha recited Sohila and made the concluding ardas or supplication. The Granth Sahib was closed and wrapped in silks. Bhai Buddha held it on his head and marched towards the chamber indicated by Guru Arjun. The Guru led the congregation singing hymns. The Granth Sahib was placed on the appointed seat, and the Guru slept on the ground by its side. Daily, in the morning, the Holy Book is taken out in state to the Harimandir and brought by night to rest in the room marked for it by Guru Arjun. The practice continues to this day. But the volume is not the same. That original copy was taken to Kartarpur when Guru Arjun's successor, Guru Hargobind, left Amritsar in 1634. There it passed into the possession of his grandson, Dhir-Mall. It has since remained in that family.

Some Sikh scholars criticize this practice. Prof. Devinder Singh Chahal, PhD writes about the reverence of SGGS by Sikhs:

*"One of the reasons has been explained by Dr Gopal Singh that due to improper understanding of 'Sabd' (Guru's Word) the Granth started to be worshipped more than read, uttered as a magical formula or a Mantram for secular benefits. Now in almost all the Gurdwaras in the world, whether they are under the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC), Amritsar or any other organization, the Aad Guru Granth Sahib (AGGS) is treated almost as an idol. However, the idol worship is condemned in Nanakian Philosophy. Moreover, I was surprised to note, when I was casually glancing through "The Cambridge Factfinder", which says under the subheading of 'Beliefs in Sikhism' as: "**Worship of the Adi Granth**" as one of the beliefs [11 - p 411]. It appears that such is the impression about Sikhism in the printed literature."*

He further writes:

"The irony is that the Sikhs are following the historical information in which the 'Sabd Guru' has been successively changed to 'Granth Guru' to 'Visible Body of the Guru' to 'Darshan Guru'. Consequently, the Sikhs started to pay more and more attention to ritualistic aspects to the 'Granth Guru' than on the deliberation on the philosophy given in the 'Sabd Guru'... Guru Nanak's observation that there would be very few Sikhs, who will deliberate on the Bani/Sabd to be called as Gurumukh, is so true today as it was then at the time of Guru Nanak. There are many (apparent) Gurumukhs, but rare are those who understand the Bani in its real perspective. Therefore, Guru Nanak thought it necessary to emphasize the importance of listening, understanding, practicing the philosophy embodied in the Bani (Stanzas # 8-15 of JAP) Guru Amardas also noticed that many Sikhs used to come to have his darshan (just to visit the Guru to see/meet him) but were not interested to listen to his philosophy:

All the humans of the world desire to behold the True Guru¹. One does not get salvation by merely seeing (the True Guru¹), unless one deliberates/contemplates on his Sabd (Word). AGGS. M. 3, pg. 594.

Guru Amardas clearly means that it is the 'Sabd' that is the 'Guru' not the human body as the 'Guru'. The same situation is seen today when most of Sikhs visit the Gurdwara just at the time of Bhog, paying their respect to the Aad Guru Granth Sahib for a few minutes then go to Langar Hall.... Since the Granth has been declared as Guru more and more attention is being paid to treat it as an idol and to have its Darshan (seeing). Moreover, continuous recitation of the AGGS (Akhand Paath) is considered a mantram for their worldly benefits as pointed out by Dr. Gopal Singh or it has become a fashion to entertain relatives and friends but never for deliberation of Sabd to understand the wisdom given in the Sabd Guru."